

Project Management Tales – Duh User

By Debbie Gallagher



Debbie Gallagher

Each story in this series of Project Management Tales is true, but company names have been changed. Some stories occurred in Canada and others took place in the US and overseas.

Background

The manager of the research department at Acme Corporation approached management with a request to provide telecommuting capability for research employees. The research staff needed mainly tools that were compiled on CDs. They also needed remote access to e-mail and some centralized databases.

Acme executives thought the telecommuting capability would allow improved staff retention and flexibility, while also reducing office rent costs. A pilot project was approved, and an employee chosen to be involved in the pilot.

The Situation

Acme decided to set up a home office, with the necessary computer and CDs in the employee's home. In addition, the employee would have Internet access to the Acme e-mail system and the central database. Because the employee lived in a rural area where there was no high-speed Internet access, a dial-up service was arranged.

The employee complained of intermittent service problems that appeared to occur when he used the Internet, resulting in e-mail failing or the screen freezing while the employee was trying to use the central database.

Action Taken

The IT department support desk suggested that the employee call the Internet service provider and file a report about the service problem. The Internet service provider said they had not been experiencing problems in the employee's area and that the problem must be with the employee's system or phone line.

The employee called back the Acme support desk and continued to call whenever the problem occurred, which became more frequent, sometimes more than once a day. Over the next three months, the problem continued and the IT department tried several different ways to identify the problem.

A technician was sent to the employee's home to replace the modem and verify the configuration settings on the employee's system. The problem was not resolved.

The Acme e-mail and database systems were monitored for problems, but none were found that would cause the employee's problems.

The telephone company tested the employee's phone line, and verified that the line was fine.

Next, a technician was sent to the employee's home to replace the computer.

Acme management was concerned about the pilot project having gone so badly. How could the IT department be having such a difficult time with something that seemed so simple?

The IT manager was instructed to make the employee's problem a priority and get it resolved. After reviewing the support desk records of all the things that had been tried, the manager met with one of the support technicians.

The technician was told to report to the employee's home to observe, and to spend every hour of every workday at the employee's home until the trouble was definitively identified.

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Epilogue

The technician returned to the office after only a few hours, and could hardly wait to share her findings with the IT manager. The technician and manager laughed all the way to the management meeting to explain the problem – the employee had been using the telephone to place outgoing phone calls while the phone line was already engaged for Internet service.

Because his phone was often in use for Internet service, his friends, family, and co-workers found the employee hard to reach. As a result, the employee tended to make frequent outgoing calls. He had not realized that the reason he had to click the phone button to get a dial tone was because his computer had the phone line in use for Internet access to e-mail or the remote database.

A second phone line was quickly installed for the employee, the problem did not recur, and the roll out of telecommuting was expanded to other employees.

Conclusion


The IT manager and technician thought the user was extremely stupid and found the whole situation hysterically funny. Unfortunately, the IT manager did not realize he had a serious customer service problem.

A few things were missed in setting up the pilot project for the telecommuting

employee. First, although the IT department asked the office services department to make arrangements for the employee to have a second phone line, they didn't follow up to make sure the line had been installed. This was a critical component of the plan.

Second, when setting up the employee's home office, assumptions were made about the employee's technological savvy. No assessment was made of the employee's capabilities, to determine whether training on Internet service was required. When the employee's problems started to occur, it took much too long for the IT department to really get serious about solving the employee's problem. He had service problems more frequently than daily, and yet it took three months and the attention of management to motivate the IT department to go on site and determine the employee's problem first hand.

An observation – sometimes the only way to assess a problem is to be on site and watch. The issue can occasionally be beyond imagination.

Given his lack of experience and the lack of IT support, the employee did well to accomplish any work at all during the pilot. 

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* This year will mark the 10th anniversary of TUG's Technical Education Conference, the theme of which is "iSeries Your Series / Getting IT Together." Here is a list of previous TEC themes and Keynote Speakers:

TEC Through the Years

Year	Keynote Speaker	Theme
1994	Jon Paris (Opening Session)	"Un-Themed"
1995	Wayne Madden	Bridging the Decade
1996	Robert Tipton	Ensuring the transfer of Knowledge
1997	Roger Pence	Exploding the AS/400 Barriers
1998	Bill Lamer	Engineering The Vision - Doing the e Thing
1999	Frank Soltis	Expanding Horizons / Powered by AS/400
2000	Wayne Madden	Maximizing the Momentum / Let's get on with IT
2001	Malcom Haines	A TUG Odyssey / The Journey Continues
2002	Al Barsa	Unleash the Power / Rev IT up!